The Fundamentals of Loving

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The Fundamentals of Loving

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Summary

When Will falls ill again at a crime scene, his symptoms far more troubling than before, Hannibal is there to look after him once more and finally decides to get him the proper medical attention he needs. This doesn't mean they can't both benefit from the curious new dynamic shift in their relationship that Will's dizzy spell brings about...

Notes

Here we bring Part Two of our round robin collaboration, this time featuring authors AGlassRoseNeverFades, Kai_99, MaddieContrary, and OmniOstler. Mind the new tags! ;)

Will is at a crime scene. There's dried blood splattered over pebbled ground and a cold body is laid across patchy grass. It isn't pretty or artful, it isn't even interesting. It's messy and gross and though Will's head is the clearest it's been since he recovered from his illness, the emptiness feels terrible.

It's clear in a way that makes his thoughts feel floaty and cloudy and downright translucent. The thoughts themselves are clear yet he can't decipher them coherently nor does he want to. His shoulders feel strangely cold despite the thick jacket he has on.

Frustrated, he raises a hand and rubs at his forehead. His head tilts down and he eyes his shoes.

He wonders if the other agents and people here actually care about the victim, if anybody here actually cares that he just got back from being horribly sick.

Maybe not.

So he keeps looking. He looks until there's nothing else to look at other than that gaping maw in the dead woman's eye. He looks until he can't tell what's his and what's her thought right at the moment he died—

"Will? You gonna stand around or you got something for us?" The man sounds exasperated.

He winces at the loud sound intruding into his scattered thoughts. His head hurts, he wants to go home. Back to his dogs and his bed. Something surges inside him, something he can't quite pick at. He doesn't want to look at the emptiness anymore. Why should he be doing this? The longer he stares, the stronger the stench of something rotten becomes. The smell is so strong that he gags from it.

What's wrong with me?

He trembles and doubles over. He almost fell before he feels firm hands holding his arms, his body inches from the horrible stench *get it away, get it away—*

He only realizes that he'd said those words out loud when his focus snaps back into a pair of familiar, dark eyes.

Hannibal's words float into his consciousness. It's as if he's underwater, the sound traveling through the calm waters ever so slowly before it reaches the synapses in his brain.

"—hear me? Blink twice if you can hear me."

Those eyes are all that he can see. Gasping shallowly, he blinks.

The eyes soften. "Good. You're Will Graham, you're in Baltimore, it's 9:38 PM and you're safe here with me."

The soft words are delivered with conviction, and Will believes it. "But why am I in Baltimore?"

Concern. "We were called here for a crime scene."

"Why aren't I home?" Will shivers. "'m not safe. There are monsters. Wanna go home."

Hannibal lets out a soft exhale. "That's right. They can't get you there, can they?"

He nods. "My bed is safe. They can't get me there."

"Let me get you home. I'll talk to Jack."

Will frowns. "Who's Jack?"

Hannibal pauses before his smile returns. "Jack is a friend. I'll talk to him. Can you wait here?"

Will blinks. "Okay."

There's an awful lot of angry gesturing coming from the man named Jack, and harsh words at Hannibal he can't overhear, which is scary but good. The man at least respects Hannibal enough not to yell even though he clearly wants to. This Jack then frowns in a different way...worried like Hannibal had looked worried when Will asked why they were in Baltimore.

Hannibal finally comes back to where he had plopped himself on the ground to sit cross-legged. People are looking at him funny, but they always do anyway, don't they? It's easy to ignore when Hannibal looks at him like that, outstretching his hand to help Will stand up again, and asks in a quiet undertone that's just for the two of them, "Ready to go now, darling?"

Will giggles at the pet name. He has never been called that or any other name other than his own. Only Hannibal calls him so many different names; darling, darling boy. Even his own name sounds so sweet coming from the man's lips.

Will giggles again and nods enthusiastically much to the other man's amusement. Hannibal opens the car door and helps him settle in, buckling the seat belt. Will squirms in his seat as he waits for Hannibal to drive them away, he doesn't like the way everybody is looking at them, or the way that man called Jack is walking towards them. Like he wants to rip Will away from Hannibal.

Will can't leave Hannibal. He won't. Because the monsters will come for him and he'll have no one to protect him then.

Will makes a distressed whimper, clutching Hannibal's sleeve in a death grip as Jack knocks on his window.

Despite his wishes, Hannibal rolls down Will's window. "Hey, uh..." Jack begins to say, looking away to the ground for a moment to let out a frustrated sigh. "Look, if you're still

sick, Will, you should have said so. You contaminated the crime scene..." Hannibal makes a noise and Jack's eyes flicker to him. Some kind of silent communication seems to pass between them because Jack sighs again. "Just...take care of yourself and get better soon, alright? We need you out here."

Will fidgets in his seat, rocking a little and twisting his hands in his lap, biting on his lower lip. "Mmm...mm-hm, 'kay," he says when an answer seems expected of him, his voice pitched soft and sweet and quiet in a way that makes Hannibal smile at him, warm, encouraging, and proud of him in a way that makes him feel all squirmy inside. He almost misses the way Jack frowns worriedly at him again.

"Doctor Lecter, are you sure dropping him off at Wolf Trap is really the best idea right now?"

"I won't be dropping him off. Will and I are going to my home." Hannibal takes Will's hand in his, prompting the boy to turn his head and look back at him. "Assuming that's alright with you, of course. I'd like to keep you close by where I can keep an eye on you if that's okay, Will. We'll see how you're feeling after a little more rest and a warm meal, then..." Here, he hesitates, glancing up at Jack again before returning his eyes to Will's once more. "Then I should see about setting up an appointment for you to meet with a friend of mine, Doctor Sutcliffe."

"I don't wanna go to a doctor," Will mumbles. Hannibal squeezes his hand reassuringly.

"I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't think it was necessary, Will," he says softly. "I promise it'll be alright. I'll be with you the whole time."

Will takes a deep breath, then squeezes his hand back and nods.

The drive to Hannibal's house goes smoothly - or as smoothly as it can go with Will squirming every five minutes and asking how much longer. Hannibal always replies with patience and a hint of worry, asking him if he remembers Hannibal's house or not. Will does. He has been there a lot of times but it never felt as far away as it does now.

He breathes a sigh of relief as they reach home. Will waits for Hannibal to help him out of the car before running to the bathroom.

When he comes back, Hannibal is in the kitchen, rummaging through the fridge.

"Ah, here you are. You should've told me that you needed to use the bathroom, Will."

"'m sorry."

"It's alright, darling. Just remember to let me know whatever is bothering you next time."

"Okay. Hannibal?"

"Yes, Will."

"I'm hungry."

Hannibal chuckles, "Of course. Why don't you keep me company while I make us something?"

Will sits on the counter as Hannibal begins making dinner. Will silently watches the other man work, swinging his legs, but he makes sure to not rattle them against the counters as he knows that Hannibal won't like that, and he doesn't wanna make Hannibal angry. He never wants Hannibal to be upset with him. He wants to make Hannibal happy and proud of him. He wants to be good for Hannibal.

"Will? Would you mind answering some of my questions?"

"Yeah, okay."

"What do you remember of today?" Hannibal spares him a glance. "Before we came here."

Will scrunches up his face in concentration, thinking about what the other man asked, and comes up blank. It should be worrying, but he doesn't understand why it should be.

"I forgot," he says.

Will wriggles in discomfort at the worrying looks the man gives him before saying, "Darling, would you remind me how old you are?"

Will crinkles his nose at the silly question. "I'm thirty...thirty-sssomething, Hannibal." He shrugs, knowing it should probably bother him more that he doesn't remember precisely, but it doesn't seem all that important anyway.

Hannibal tilts his head at him curiously like Will has just shown him a very interesting puzzle. "Fascinating," he murmurs. "And what do you do for a living? You remember being thirty-'something,' but how old do you *feel,* Will?"

"I don't understand," Will tells him apologetically, feeling anxious now that Hannibal is going to be annoyed with him.

Hannibal brushes a thumb between his eyebrows to smooth the worried wrinkles away, then trails his hand along the side of Will's face to cradle his cheek. "Never mind then, darling. It's unimportant. What matters is that I'm going to take care of you." He leans in and presses a gentle kiss to the same spot between his brows his thumb touched. Will blushes and giggles.

Hannibal smiles at him and takes a step back to focus on the dinner, but Will grabs his shirt before he could get away. Will pulls the man back towards him. Hannibal complies without question, curious to see where this is going.

Will's face feels hot as he bumps his forehead against the other man's mouth, silently asking for another kiss. Hannibal makes a surprised noise and purses his lips, kissing him again with a smile.

As Hannibal swiftly works through preparing dinner afterwards, Will goes back to idly swinging his legs to and fro. His fingers curl over the edge of the counter and the tips of them rub over the hidden texture underneath the countertop lip. He looks down at his knuckles and

watches interestedly as they flex with the movement of his fingertips. He looks back up, bored, and stares at Hannibal's back.

Hannibal finally stops adding things to the pots. Will tilts his head curiously as Hannibal hums something pleasant while he stirs what smells like chicken soup.

"What are you makin'?" Will asks, ignorant of his voice obviously lilting in a way that expresses his impatience.

"We'll be having Tinolang Manok, a type of chicken soup, and some rice. You won't have any problems with that I hope?" Hannibal asks. Will's nose scrunches at the unfamiliar name of the dish, but a convenient waft of it reaches his nose and his mouth waters.

"I'll be good with anything you make," Will says. Hannibal turns to him and smiles. Will momentarily preens under Hannibal's approving gaze.

He wonders when Hannibal will be done and whether it would be rude to ask, but as soon as the thought flutters in his mind, he hears Hannibal leisurely stating that the food will be done in a few minutes, that the rice is taking a bit longer than he thought it would.

After just a few more moments, Hannibal is soon filling a bowl with the soup, spooning steaming rice into the same bowl afterwards. Will sighs happily as Hannibal steps toward him, bowl and spoon in hand.

Unbidden, Will leans forward and opens his mouth. He looks up at Hannibal with expectation and doesn't register the pleased surprise in the man's sudden stop in front of him.

"You're such a good boy for me, Will," Hannibal sighs, almost wistful. Will feels like he's glowing from within so bright that Hannibal must be able to see it.

He carefully blows away steam from the first spoonful, making sure it's not too hot, and then brings the utensil to Will's waiting lips. Will hums happily around his mouthful, slurping a little at the broth before chewing and swallowing. "Mmm, 's really yummy."

Hannibal's eyes crinkle ever deeper with his smile. "I'm delighted to hear it, darling."

Will grabs the spoon from Hannibal's hand and carefully brings it to the other man's lips, wanting Hannibal to eat too. Hannibal raises his eyebrow at him in surprise but Will mistakes it for something else. He thinks that he forgot to blow on the soup. Silly him. He rectifies his mistake and when he offers the spoon a second time, Hannibal takes it, humming heartily.

When they are finished with dinner, Hannibal takes Will upstairs, showing him a guest room.

"This is where you'll stay until you get better, Will. My room is down the hall, feel free to come to me if you need anything."

Will's brows furrow, listening to what Hannibal is saying but not understanding. Why does he need to stay here? Why can't he sleep with Hannibal? Did he do something? Is Hannibal mad at him?

"'m sorry," he blurts out.

Hannibal turns to regard him. "Whatever for darling?"

"For making you mad. I'm sorry." Will shifts on his feet, panicking by seconds as the silence grows.

"Come here, Will."

Will hesitantly walks to the older man. He doesn't make eye contact though, fearing the disappointment he might find there. Will makes a low sound of relief as Hannibal pulls him into a hug.

"I'm not mad at you, sweet boy."

"So why are you making me sleep alone?" Will shoots back.

Hannibal's brows raise at that, looking amused. "Did you want me to sleep with you?"

Will feels unaccountably embarrassed all of a sudden. He looks down and picks at the thread of the sheets. "The monsters might still be here," he mutters at last.

A considering pause. "I suppose you're right."

He looks up with hope blooming in his chest.

Hannibal's smile is kind. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable first? I'll join you shortly."

Will nods eagerly. He burrows himself under the duvet while Hannibal goes away, and he entertains himself by beginning to count the sheep. He gets to fifty before Hannibal appears again, looking odd in silk sleepwear.

Hannibal smiles and silently slides into the space Will makes for him. He switches off the light at the bedside table before he gathers Will in his arms.

Will sighs contentedly as he burrows himself into that familiar warmth.

(Why was it so familiar?)

He doesn't have a chance to clearly register the thought as his eyes droop slowly, and he's only aware that Hannibal is petting through his curls before falling asleep in the next instant.

*

When Will wakes, it's to the warm feeling of someone's body next to him. He blinks his eyes open slowly, his mind still addled with sleep and a developing headache.

This is not my bed.

That much is clear when he sees Hannibal watching him closely as he tilts his head up. He groans at the pounding headache. “Hannibal?”

There’s a flash of relief and something unnamed in Hannibal’s eyes, there and gone in an instant.

“Can you tell me who you are right now, Will?”

Another groan. “You want me to do the grounding exercise *now?”*

“Indulge me, please.”

He sighs. “I’m Will Graham, it’s fuck-o-clock in the morning, and I’m at fuck-if-I-know, in bed with my psychiatrist.” *Again* goes unsaid between them.

A small chuckle. “Fear makes you rude, darling.”

The pet name shocks him somewhat, some of the memories from yesterday returning to him in flashes.

Mortified, he curses.

Will gets out of the bed, ignoring Hannibal’s questioning look, and locks himself in the bathroom. Fuck. What is happening to him? He doesn't understand what is going on. He remembers something from last night but it is enough to give him an idea of how fucked up his situation is. He needs to get his head checked. But that would need going out and facing Hannibal, which is not something he is ready for. Sure, they talked a bit at his home about their shared interest in each other but how is Hannibal going to react now? Will he realize how insane Will is and back out?

The thought leaves a bitter taste in Will's mouth, but he can't hide away forever. He needs to deal with this.

Will freshens up and walks back into the room to find it empty. Hannibal must have realized that he needed some time alone. As expected, he finds the other man in the kitchen, making protein scramble from the looks of it.

"Good morning," he says lamely.

Hannibal smiles. "Good morning, Will. How are you feeling now?"

"I - I have a migraine I think."

"I believe you have been lacking in caring for your health after I left you the day before. You must not be careless, Will."

He merely nods, following Hannibal to the dining room and settling in the chair beside the man. Will notices that Hannibal just brought one plate with him. For a second, Will panics

and thinks that he has presumed that he is invited to stay for breakfast, but then, Hannibal carefully brings the fork to his lips.

"Wha-what are you doing?"

"Taking care of you, darling, as I promised I would." The feeling that swoops low in his belly at these words is difficult to shake off.

"But I can feed myself," he says. He can hear the weak protest in his voice for what it really is, and so can Hannibal, whose smile now glints with something like triumph.

"I know you can, my dear," he says, and raises the fork to Will's lips again anyway. His mouth parts this time, allowing the fork entry, though he has to close his eyes against the pleased hum in his throat. Delicious, as always.

"You like this," Will accuses as Hannibal gathers up another forkful of egg and sausage.

"Very much," the man answers serenely.

"Why?" Will asks, voice faint.

"What's not to like? My boy is allowing me to provide for him and give him the care that he needs."

"St-still," Will stammers, taking the fork from him. "You—you can't claim you actually enjoyed me acting like an overgrown toddler yesterday."

"I can. I did." Hannibal closes his eyes and makes a soft sound as well as Will feeds him this time. A blush rises to Will's cheeks as the man swallows. He's sure he didn't have this kind of reaction to the two of them feeding each other yesterday. "I do." The implication hits him so hard that Will has to set the fork down on the table.

"You can't think we're going to—yesterday was not *normal,* Hannibal! It's just another sign of how broken my brain is, how much I'm *cracking."*

"On the contrary, age regression in the face of trauma, exacerbated by recovery from an illness, was the most natural behavior that could be expected. Especially compared to far more troubling symptoms."

Will remembers enough to know what he's getting at. "My name is Will Graham. I'm thirty-seven years old. I teach and I profile. I know who Jack Crawford is," he says wryly. The relief in Hannibal's eyes makes his smile more sincere.

"After we finish here, I'll call Doctor Sutcliffe, a neurologist at Johns Hopkins."

When it is time to leave for his appointment, Hannibal buckles him in his seat. Will is so baffled that he doesn't say anything and shifts awkwardly, not understanding if what the man says is true and he really likes taking care of Will or if Hannibal is merely humoring him.

"Do you have to use the bathroom, Will?"

Will sputters, "Wh-What?"

"You are restless."

Will remembers what happened the last time he was in the car and his face burns in embarrassment. He shakes his head. Thankfully Hannibal doesn't say anything for the rest of the way.

When they reach the hospital, Will hurries to get out of the car before Hannibal could take it upon himself to help him again.

Will can easily pick up displeasure from Hannibal as if Will did something horrible to deprive the man from treating him like a toddler. Will sighs, he doesn't know what to do with this situation he has gotten himself into. Doing this alone is one thing, and in public is a whole new level that he is really not ready for. He'll talk with Hannibal later.

Doctor Sutcliffe is a man with greed in his eyes for Hannibal. Will doesn't need to be an empath to see the lust oozing off him for the other man, or how Hannibal is preening under the attention.

Will grits his teeth at the unexpected jealousy he feels for the man he has no claims on. Even so, he shifts a little closer to Hannibal as he is introduced and petulantly slips his hand in the other man's. Hannibal doesn't give any indication that the touch is unwelcome, instead, he receives a squeeze. Will has to bite back his urge to stick out his tongue at Sutcliffe. His smug idiotic grin can't be helped, though.

The handholding doesn't escape Sutcliffe's notice and has the wondrous side effect of cooling the man's attention toward his psychiatrist significantly. He ceases twittering away about the good old days of them interning together or whatever—Will can admit he hasn't really been paying as much attention to the conversation at hand as he probably should—and stiffly leads them to the MRI room.

Any smugness Will feels at the neurologist's obvious annoyance and discomfort is gone as he silently strips down and replaces his clothing with a hospital gown. His voice is too quiet when the knock on the door comes, so he has to clear his throat and try again. "Come in."

Instead of the nurse who handed him the gown and gave him the privacy to change, it's Hannibal who walks in. "I thought you might be more comfortable if I assisted you instead of a stranger." Will nods and immediately goes to him, putting his arms around the man in a needy hug. Hannibal makes another surprised, pleased sound and squeezes him back just as tightly.

"It'll be over before you know it, darling. Now let's get you laid out and comfortable...yes, that's it. I'll be in the observation room looking over your scans with Doctor Sutcliffe during the process, but I'll be back to collect you as soon as it's over. Are you ready?" Will can feel his lip starting to tremble even before Hannibal delicately smooths his thumb over it to halt the motion. Will nods, wanting to prove that he can be good and brave for the man.

The sound in the machine is awful. Will forces himself to keep still and desperately tries not to fidget, remembering the nurse's warnings about not moving to mess up the imaging. He doesn't want to have to go through this more than once. With shaking hands, he pulls his clothes back on afterwards when Sutcliffe's voice over the intercom tells him he can. He goes straight to Hannibal's arms again for another hug as soon as the door opens, then follows him back to the neurologist's office.

Sutcliffe wastes no time in giving his diagnosis in a clipped tone. His mouth is set in a displeased frown every time his eyes slide over to Will's hand clasped in Hannibal's. A measure of comfort for Will's benefit, but a definite eyesore in Sutcliffe's eyes.

Will squeezes Hannibal's hand while he knows Sutcliffe's watching. Sutcliffe's words halt for a few seconds, and he frowns at Will minutely before he recovers and resumes his diagnosis.

"—so I can safely say it's anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis," Sutcliffe finishes, his gaze focused on Hannibal.

Though Hannibal is looking at Sutcliffe, the upward tilt at the corner of his lips indicates his amusement at Will's action. He squeezes back.

"I had thought as much," Hannibal admits. "There was a fevered sweetness to his scent; it was particularly strong yesterday."

Sutcliffe chuckles. "You and your sense of smell." His glance shifts to Will again. "You always were fond of the rarefied."

The thinly veiled derision in his tone makes Will bristle.

Hannibal steps in before he can respond, however. "Will has a remarkably vivid imagination. Beautiful. Rarefied doesn't even begin to cover it."

He's sure he's blushing from his head down to his toes. Hannibal doesn't bother to hide the fondness in his tone, and Will chooses not to comment. He looks at his shoes instead, heart hammering while Sutcliffe continues to explain his treatment.

He barely listens to the explanation, though he thinks he should have moments later.

"So you're saying your house is well-equipped to handle someone recovering from encephalitis?" Sutcliffe asks skeptically. "The treatment would take a few weeks, maybe months depending on how well he takes to the drugs. Recovery might take even longer."

"I assure you I'm up to the task," Hannibal replies.

"Wait, what?" Will interrupts, feeling lost.

Hannibal smiles at him. "We were talking about your options once you're discharged. I told Donald that I'm more than capable of caring for you."

Will wants to protest—knows that he probably should, at the very least, argue logistics about work, about the dogs, anything to point out what a monumentally bad idea this is—but

Sutcliffe and Hannibal are looking at him expectantly, the former with hidden malcontent and ugly hope that Will's going to prove he and Hannibal are not what he thinks they are, the latter with a sort of yearning that hits him like a punch to the gut. He says yes to anything, everything, the man silently asks him to.

*

The first week of treatment is thankfully a blur, since he's confined to a hospital room for most of it and completely delirious, the hallucinations that have been plaguing him off and on for months making one final desperate hurrah to claim his sanity for good. He'd let Hannibal tell Jack and his boss at the Academy what was going on, but the man also thankfully does his job of keeping visitors at bay. He doesn't want anyone to see him like this, staring at shadowy things that aren't real and sobbing for Hannibal to come hold him while he trembles and cries.

His mind slowly clears, his fever breaks, and a week later Hannibal wheels him out in a hospital wheelchair, then gently lifts him and helps into the passenger seat of his Bentley. Will's a little weak but not so infirm that he can't walk, but he allows the delicate treatment anyway, nose buried in the man's nape as he picks him up. Hannibal preens and kisses him on the forehead as reward for indulging him and Will melts further into his seat as the man buckles him in.

"The dogs are with Alana. I didn't divulge the details of your diagnosis, only that you were unwell but wouldn't be taking visitors for the time being. I hope that's alright." Will hums affirmatively, head lolling against the seat, feeling a little sleepy despite doing none of the work of moving himself from his hospital bed to Hannibal's car. He misses his pups but knows they'll be fine with Alana. He watches Hannibal instead of the road outside.

By the time they reach home and Hannibal carefully sets him on the bed, Will is half asleep. He's so tired that he nearly sobs when Hannibal maneuvers him out of his clothes to help him change into pajamas. Will knows that Hannibal wants to make sure that he is comfortable, knows that Hannibal is hell-bent on properly taking care of him, but right now, all he wants is to be held.

Hannibal hooks up the IV before leaving to take a shower. Will is not pleased. He is irritated and mad at Hannibal. He does not want to fight with Hannibal because his papa always said friends don't fight, but he has been asking Hannibal to hold him for days and the man refused by saying that it's not an appropriate place for that - whatever that means.

So when Hannibal comes to bed and tries to pull Will back against him, Will huffs and wriggles away.

"Darling, are you still mad at me?"

"I'm not talkin' to you, and I'm not your darlin' anymore."

The hurt gasp is almost enough to make Will take it back right then but he holds his ground. His daddy wouldn't hold him until now and for that he's gotta pay.

"Is this because I could not hold you in the hospital room, mon chéri? I told you why I could not, my dear. The nurses bustling in and out to check your IV would have surely kicked me out had they seen me climb into bed beside you." Will scowls and turns his face into the pillow since he can't roll any farther away from Hannibal without rolling off the bed. "Was I not there at your side every time you asked for me though? To wipe your brow and hold your hand and promise you the world as soon as we got you out of there?"

Excuses. "Don' see no world here," Will grumbles half into the pillow.

"What can I do to make it up to you, darling? Please tell me." Hannibal thinks he's so clever sneaking that one in too like he wouldn't notice. Hmph.

"Thirsty."

"I'll fetch you some water then--"

"NO! Choc'la milk." Hannibal blinks and asks him to repeat it. "I want choc-o-late milk," he says, sounding the full word out grumpily. He wants to stick his tongue out at the way Hannibal smiles at him now but doesn't dare.

"Very well. I'll be right back." He frowns sadly into the pillow when Hannibal leaves but does not cry. He'll come back with the milk and then maybe Will will let him hold him, not a moment sooner.

Hannibal comes back with a tall glass of chocolate milk and a red-and-silver striped metal straw. Will sits up, sniffles forgotten, and parts his mouth to let the straw in and suck. Hannibal smiles and pets his hair while he drinks.

"Now what do we say, darling?" he asks, setting the glass down when Will lightly pushes it back to indicate he's done for now.

"Thank you, Da--aa--um." Will hides his face shyly.

"You're welcome, darling. Will you allow Daddy to hold you now?" Will nods enthusiastically and sighs when his daddy places a kiss on his temple as he snuggles up to him from behind.

"But I'm still mad at you," Will hurries to clear this. After all, he needs Hannibal - Daddy to know that he can get super mad too.

"Of course, mio caro ragazzo. Tell me what else I need to do to earn your forgiveness."

Will thinks long and hard, lips pursed in concentration while Daddy rubs his belly lightly. It always makes him sleepy and this is no exception. He is fighting to stay awake, but he doesn't tell Daddy to stop, he won't when he finally has what he wanted for days.

"Um, I want choco milk every day and pancakes and pizzas and burgers and Oreos and - and--"

"Easy, darling, you'll rot your teeth at this rate," Daddy says, chuckling at his sleepy mumbling.

"And I want cush cush for breakfast."

"A what?"

This is the first time that Will has heard his Daddy sound so confused, he giggles and turns over.

"Cush Cush," he repeats. "Nana used to make it for me."

"Hmm, I am unaware of that dish, but I will try to learn it for you, darling."

"Really?" Will squeals in excitement.

"Really. Will you forgive me then?"

"Oh, heck yeah! I'll m--"

Will shuts his mouth with a snap, stopping before he could totally embarrass himself by saying what he was about to. Daddy notices but before he could ask Will about it, Will opens his mouth for a big yawn to show Daddy how tired he is.

"Oh, look at the time. Goodnight, Daddy."

"Good night, sweet boy."

Thankfully, Daddy doesn't say anything and simply pets his hair until he falls asleep.

*

The morning brings Will a different set of challenges when he wakes up nestled against Hannibal. That seems to happen a lot these days.

Flashes of the previous day return to him as he stretches, and he’s not surprised to hear a hum of greeting from Hannibal. Hannibal has always been an early riser. It should worry him that he knows this.

“Good morning, Will.”

“Morning,” Will mumbles against Hannibal’s side. He’s not willing to return to reality just yet, but maybe it’s better that they get this over with now. He rolls away to put some space between them while Hannibal watches silently.

“Are we ever going to talk,” Will rasps when he’s finally able to gather his thoughts, “about whatever this is between us?”

“Only when you are ready to do so,” Hannibal says. He looks much more awake than Will feels. “I would like to preface the discussion with an apology. I apologize if I crossed any boundaries while you were sick. Since we now know that your hallucinations and your regression are in part due to the encephalitis, it would be prudent to discuss what you are comfortable with going forward.”

Going forward. Right. Hannibal means to continue this, then.

Will rises and sits cross-legged on the bed, waiting for Hannibal to follow. An odd little pow-wow in bed. The thought makes him smile.

“I want to thank you for taking care of me when I was sick,” he begins, licking his lips. “And during my... regression.” The word leaves a bitter taste on his tongue.

“Will. Don’t be ashamed of your needs.”

Will blushes. He avoids Hannibal’s eyes as he forces himself to speak. “Easier to brush it off when you’re not the one crushing on a friend just because said friend took care of you.”

A charged silence settles on them as Will fights to control his blush. When he looks up, Hannibal is beaming at him.

Oh no, he thinks. That smile will be the death of him.

Instead of replying to the confession, Hannibal simply rises from the bed. “Shall we discuss this over breakfast?” Will nods in agreement.

"I'm afraid as we both just woke up, I haven't had a chance to look into recipes for this, ah, 'cush cush' you mentioned last night," Hannibal continues as they enter the kitchen together.

Will blushes all over again just hearing that name come out of Hannibal's mouth, though he knows it's certainly not his own fault the dish has such a childish sounding moniker. "It's ok, you don't have to."

"We really must delete that phrase from your vocabulary, Will." Will huffs a small laugh.

"Alright, well, um...I guess I could show you how to make it." He's certain to get shot down since there's no way Hannibal would trust anyone else to take charge in his kitchen, but the man surprises him by simply smiling and gesturing that Will has free reign.

"Ok, first I need, uh, yellow cornmeal." Hannibal retrieves it for him. It's oddly exciting, standing in front of the stove to do the actual cooking while relegating Hannibal to sous chef duties that are little more than fetching things for him. "My nana always used cane syrup but just sugar is fine if—oh!" he exclaims, pleasantly surprised when Hannibal sets a small jar of the syrup by his elbow.

Will feels weird about taking something like this to the dining room, so he takes another liberty in setting their bowls down on the island counter instead. Hannibal hums curiously around the first spoonful in a way that is neither approving nor disapproving, which makes Will feel better than if the man had simply pretended to like it.

"It's not something I would normally make for myself, but I can see why you like it. Now, about this 'crush' of yours, Will..." Will groans and Hannibal grins at him unapologetically. "I can't see how you thought I would take it poorly, considering it was not so long ago I expressed my own feelings for you similarly over breakfast."

"Maybe I wasn't so sure whether I'd imagined that or not," Will grouses, poorly disguising the sudden lightness in his chest.

"You did not," Hannibal tells him softly.

Will swallows the lump around his throat. Wherever he'd expected this conversation to lead, it sure wasn't this. It feels too raw, too soon to bring up his needs and desires, considering how he'd imposed himself upon Hannibal.

"What are you thinking of, little one?"

Will bites his lips, willing himself not to scream with the embarrassment flooding through him. He stares at his empty bowl for a long minute.

"I...didn't expect reciprocation, at least not in...this," Will says vaguely, his voice shaky.

"Did you not believe that I care for you, and that I like taking care of you?" Hannibal's voice is soft, no reproach to be found.

It sounds as if he's truly trying to understand, and it frustrates Will further. "I don't get what's in it for you," he blurts out after a while. "I...of course I liked being cared for"—being Daddy's little one—"but this is beyond our initial arrangement where we were just having 'conversations,' don't you think?"

"Is your worry only predicated on the assumption that I gain nothing out of this arrangement?"

Will shrugs listlessly. "I guess."

There's a soft, rustling sound before a warm palm encases Will's hand. The touch startles him, though he lets Hannibal hold his hand. He stares at it almost disbelievingly.

"I've told you before how much I like caring for you, Will. Just as you have enjoyed letting go of all your troubles in your time of need, I have enjoyed the chance to provide and fulfill those needs for you."

"And that's it?" Will asks, skeptical still.

"That's all it needs to be, until you ask for more from me."

There’s no telling what Hannibal can mean by that, and Will’s thoughts are still too jumbled that he finds himself nodding along.

“And what if I don’t want to be...your little one?”

“Then at that point we can continue to enjoy the conversations that we have had so far.” Hannibal ends the sentence with a reassuring squeeze of his hand. “I would only give you what you require of me, Will.”

Will nods, still struggling to accept that he is getting what he wanted so easily. But there's still one issue that needs to be addressed and there is no way to sugar coat it in fancy words like Hannibal does, so he doesn't.

"And...and what if I want...more?"

"More in the sense of sexual intimacy, I presume."

Will nods, not trusting himself to verbally answer.

"If that is something you want, then, yes, I'd be willing to partake in that as well."

"But do you actually want it or are you just indulging me."

"Oh, Will," Hannibal brings Will's hand to his lips to press a soft kiss there. "Of course, I want everything with you, darling."

Will is still not ready to believe this, not because he doesn't trust Hannibal, but because exception breeds disappointment. For him, it's not a fleeting experiment that he can forget about if it didn't work out, he knows that he already is too invested and he is going to get more involved.

Will can feel that Hannibal means every word he says, but he doesn't need a therapist to tell him that he has abandonment issues and he wouldn't be able to pick himself back up if Hannibal left him. Especially if he shares his other self too.

Will can't say no, even if a small part of him wants to back out now. It's not too late for him, but he doesn't. He let himself have this and pray to God that he can keep this amazing man who for some reason completely adores him.

"Promise me, you'll never leave me."

"I promise you, Will. I will always take care of you and let no harm come to you. I will give you everything you desire, beloved."

Will can't stop the overjoyed tears from escaping his eyes as he rises from his seat to close the distance between them and let the older man pull him into a kiss.

It's slow and sweet, and so full of feeling that he finally thinks maybe he can really believe it. It's clear from the way Hannibal kisses him that he's wanted to do so for a long time. Will sinks deeper into it, into Hannibal and his wonderful care, feeling hazy and giddy for air

when they finally pull away from each other and Hannibal gathers up their dishes to wash at the sink.

"One thing I should ask for clarification on before we proceed," Hannibal says. Will gets the feeling he waited until his back was turned, hands busy with the washing, so Will wouldn't feel too awkward and keenly observed when he asks. "Do you want sexual intimacy only when you are in an adult frame of mind, or would you like it when you are in an age-regressed headspace as well?" Will stares at his back, mind boggling a bit.

"I-I hadn't thought about--is that a thing?" He feels foolish as soon as the words leave his mouth. There is nothing new under the sun, after all, an adage he's well familiar with and for which sexual proclivities make the rule, not the exception. Of course it's a thing.

"It is only if you consent, both now and in the future," Hannibal says, bypassing the generality of the question to focus on the specifics of *them.* "It may never come up at all, of course. I only wish to know how I should respond if you express sexual interest while in that headspace. Should I reciprocate or gently decline?"

Phrased that way, Will knows the answer almost too quickly. "Yes! I mean, um...reciprocation is always preferable to rejection honestly," he admits rather sheepishly. "Only if you want to, of course."

Hannibal dries his hands on a nearby dish towel and crowds back into Will's space, hands on the countertop on either side of him, caging him against it. "Darling, I assure you, my desire for you in any way I can have you is not in question," he says, somehow making the statement sound both sultry and reassuring.

Hannibal kisses him again and it is as sweet and soft as before. He is aware that if they keep doing this, it might progress into something more, but he is not ready for that yet. He needs time to process the change in their relationship and what that entails. Hannibal seems to sense his hesitation and he smoothly pulls back with a peck on his lips.

The rest of the day passes quietly, both enjoying their newfound intimacy and mutual agreement to 'take it slow,' so to say. Which is more for Will's benefit really as he is sure that given the chance, Hannibal is going to ravish him until he can't remember his own name. But the man is a complete gentleman, not pushing Will's boundaries in the slightest.

Will can't believe that this man adores him so much, but he knows that he'll do anything to keep Hannibal.

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